

Jewish Faith and the Holocaust

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Source: *Religious Studies*, Jun., 1990, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Jun., 1990), pp. 277-293

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20019409>

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DAN COHN-SHERBOK

JEWISH FAITH AND THE HOLOCAUST

Throughout their long history suffering has been the hallmark of the Jewish people. Driven from their homeland, buffeted from country to country and plagued by persecutions, Jews have been rejected, despised and led as a lamb to the slaughter. The Holocaust is the most recent chapter in this tragic record of events. The Third Reich's system of murder squads, concentration camps and killing centres eliminated nearly 6 million Jews; though Jewish communities had previously been decimated, such large scale devastation profoundly affected the Jewish religious consciousness. For many Jews it has seemed impossible to reconcile the concept of a loving, compassionate and merciful God with the terrible events of the Nazi regime. A number of important Jewish thinkers have grappled with traditional beliefs about God in the light of such suffering, but in various ways their responses are inadequate. If the Jewish faith is to survive, Holocaust theology will need to incorporate a belief in the Afterlife in which the righteous of Israel who died in the death camps will receive their due reward.

THEOLOGY OF PROTEST

Prominent among modern Jewish writers who have wrestled with the theological implications of the Holocaust is the novelist Elie Wiesel. At the concentration camp Birkenau, Wiesel came close to death as he marched toward a pit of flaming bodies only to stop a few feet from the edge. 'Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever',¹ he wrote. For Wiesel the Holocaust is inexplicable with God, but also it cannot be understood without Him. Auschwitz made it impossible for Wiesel to trust God's goodness, but it also made questions about God more important. In this regard Wiesel has been heard to remark: 'If I told you I believed in God, I would be lying; if I told you I did not believe in God, I would be lying'.² Wiesel is thus at odds with God because the only way he can be for God after Auschwitz is by being against Him – to embrace God without protest would be to vindicate Him and legitimize evil.

This stance is eloquently portrayed in Wiesel's play, *The Trial of God* which is set in the village of Shamgorod during the season of Purim. Three Jewish

¹ E. Wiesel, *Nights* (Bantam Books, 1982). As quoted by R. Rubenstein and J. Roth *Approaches to Auschwitz* (SCM Press, 1987), p. 283.

² *Ibid.* p. 285.

actors have lost their way and arrive at the village which they discover is not the place for joyous celebration since it was devastated by a pogrom two years before. Only two Jews survived: Berish the innkeeper who escaped and his daughter who was abused on her wedding night and has now lost touch with the world. In the area of Shamgorod anti-Semitic hatred has flared up once again and a new pogrom appears imminent. The Festival of Purim calls for a play which will enact the trial of God. Yet there is a difficulty. None of the actors wants to speak up for God. Unnoticed however a stranger whose name is Sam enters the inn and volunteers to act as a defence attorney for God. It appears that Berish's housekeeper Maria has seen this person before and she cautions Berish to have nothing to do with him. But despite this warning the play commences.

Berish begins his persecution by contending that God could use his power to save the victims, but He does not. 'So', he asks, 'on whose side is He? Could the killer kill without His blessing – without His complicity?'³ Berish has no sympathy for the defendant: 'If I am given the choice of feeling sorry for Him or for human beings, I choose the latter anytime. He is big enough, strong enough to take care of Himself; man is not'.⁴ In response Sam answers every accusation and urges that emotion should not take the place of evidence. The actors who have formed the court are impressed and inquire who Sam is. As the play concludes, a violent mob approaches the inn. Realizing the end is near, the Jewish actors elect to die wearing their Purim masks. Sam puts a mask on as well, and Maria's premonition is confirmed – the mask he wears is that of Samael which signifies Satan. As a final candle is extinguished, the inn door opens to the sound of murderous tumult including Satan's laughter.

Though this play is not directly about the Holocaust since it is set three centuries previously, it does touch on the central theological dilemma posed by the death camps. As Wiesel explains in the foreword to the play and elsewhere, he witnessed a trial of God at Auschwitz where three rabbis who conducted the proceedings found God guilty and then participated in the daily prayer. The reason they performed this seemingly inconsistent act is related to a story Wiesel tells about a Spanish Jewish family that had been expelled from Spain.⁵ Finding no refuge from continual persecution, the father who was the last to survive prayed:

Master of the Universe, I know what you want – I understand what you are doing. You want despair to overwhelm me. You want me to cease invoking your name to glorify and sanctify it. Well, I tell you! No, no – a thousand times no! You shall not succeed! In spite of me and in spite of you, I shall shout the Kaddish, which is a song of faith, for You and against You. The song you shall not still, God of Israel.⁶

³ E. Wiesel, *The Trial of God* (Random House, 1979), p. 129.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 133.

⁵ R. Rubenstein and J. Roth, *op. cit.* p. 287.

⁶ E. Wiesel, *A Jew Today* (Random House, 1978), p. 136.

In stating his case for and against God, Wiesel emphasizes that there was no need for God to allow the Holocaust to occur – it was an event that produced only death and destruction. Yet Wiesel asserts to be Jewish is ‘never to give up – never to yield to despair’.⁷ It is in this spirit that Wiesel conducts his dispute with God. As a survivor of the horrors of the death camps, Wiesel refuses to let God go. His struggles serve as a testimony that the religious quest was not incinerated in the gas chambers of the Nazi period.

Although Wiesel’s literary works dealing with the Holocaust are not intended to provide a systematic theological response to the death camps, he does struggle with central religious questions. As we have seen, his experiences did not lead him to atheism, yet he repeatedly casts doubts on the traditional Jewish understanding of God. Unfortunately, in these reflections Wiesel does not clarify what position he adopts; his statement that he would be lying if he claimed both to believe in God and not to believe in Him simply highlights his own confusion. Thus for those who are anxious to find a solution to the theological dilemmas posed by the Holocaust, Wiesel’s protest against God simply reinforces their religious perplexity and underscores the urgency of discovering a theodicy in which God’s silence during World War II can be understood.

A NON-THEISTIC RESPONSE

Unlike Wiesel some Jewish thinkers have found it impossible to sustain a belief in the traditional understanding of God after the Holocaust. According to Richard Rubenstein – the most eloquent spokesman for this viewpoint – Auschwitz is the utter and decisive refutation of the traditional affirmation of a providential God who acts in history and watches over the Jewish people whom he has chosen from all nations. In *After Auschwitz* published in 1966, he writes:

How can Jews believe in an omnipotent, beneficent God after Auschwitz? Traditional Jewish theology maintains that God is the ultimate, omnipotent actor in historical drama. It has interpreted every major catastrophe in Jewish history as God’s punishment of a sinful Israel. I fail to see how this position can be maintained without regarding Hitler and the SS as instruments of God’s will... To see any purpose in the death camps, the traditional believer is forced to regard the most demonic, anti-human explosion of all history as a meaningful expression of God’s purposes.⁸

In this study Rubenstein insists that the Auschwitz experience has resulted in a rejection of the traditional theology of history which must be replaced by a positive affirmation of the value of human life in and for itself without any special theological relationship. Joy and fulfilment are to be sought in

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 164.

⁸ R. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz* (Bobbs Merrill, 1966), p. 153.

this life, rather than in a mystical future or eschaton. Thus he maintains that we should attempt to establish contact with those powers of life and death which engendered the ancient Canaanites' feelings about Baal, Astarte and Anith. This would not mean literally a return to the actual worship of these deities, but simply that earth's fruitfulness, its vicissitudes and its engendering power will once again become the central spiritual realities of Jewish life. According to Rubenstein God is the ultimate nothing, and it is to this Divine source that man and the world are ultimately to return. There is no hope of salvation for mankind; man's ultimate destiny is to be returned to Divine nothingness. In this context Auschwitz fits into the archaic religious consciousness and observance of the universal cycle of death and rebirth. The Nazi slaughter of European Jewry was followed by the rebirth of the Jewish people in the land of Israel.

Today Rubenstein sees his position as akin to mystical religion. In a recent investigation of the origins of the Holocaust and its consequences on Jewish thought,⁹ he notes that his loss of faith and the events of the Second World War caused him to have a bleak view of the world. But at present he would be more apt to adopt an optimistic stance. Yet what has remained the same in his insistence that the traditional conception of God needs to be rejected. Further he asserts that the Jews are not God's Divinely chosen people; they are a people like any other, whose religion was influenced by cultural and historical events. Some of Rubenstein's critics have asked whether anyone who accepts his view has any reason to remain Jewish since the Jewish heritage is infused with the belief that the Jews are under the obligation to observe Divinely ordained commandments. What reason could there be to keep the Sabbath, observe dietary laws, practice circumcision, or even marry someone Jewish if the God of the Biblical and rabbinic tradition does not exist?

In an early response to such criticism, Rubenstein pointed out that the elimination of the religious framework of the Jewish faith does not undermine the sociological and psychological functions of Judaism. The ethic content of Judaism can persist even in the absence of religious faith. Judaism, he argued, is not simply a belief system – it is constituted of rituals and customs, which enable adherents of the tradition to celebrate life-cycle events and cope with crises. As Rubenstein explained:

I do not believe that a theistic God is necessary for Jewish religious life... I have suggested that Judaism is the way in which we share the decisive times and crises of life through the traditions of our inherited community. The need for that sharing is not diminished in the time of the death of God.¹⁰

⁹ R. Rubenstein and J. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz* (SCM Press, 1987).

¹⁰ R. Rubenstein *After Auschwitz* as quoted by R. Rubenstein and J. Roth *op. cit.* pp. 312–13.

Yet despite this stance, Rubenstein believed it is nevertheless possible to view the cosmos as the expression of a single, unified and unifying source and ground which we name as God. If human beings are seen as an integral element of the cosmos, which is an expression of the Divine ground, then God is capable of thought, reflection and feeling.

Such a reversion to nature paganism parallels the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel. Referring to traditional liturgy, Rubenstein pointed out that during the period of the diaspora Jews prayed that they be returned to the Holy Land. When this goal was attained, Jewish history had in principle come to an end, but since Rubenstein does not embrace polytheism, he argued that after Auschwitz and the return to Israel, the Divine manifested in nature was the God to whom Jews would turn in place of the God of history, especially in Israel. Rejecting the biblical view of a providential God, Rubenstein thus subscribed to a form of Canaanite nature paganism.

Over the years Rubenstein's earlier paganism lost its importance. He previously argued that when the Jewish people lived in their own country, they would revert to nature worship. But he eventually came to see that most Jews did not desire to live in Israel and those who settled there had no interest in nature paganism. Those who ceased to believe in God simply became secular Jews. But Rubenstein has parted company with these Jewish secularists; in mysticism he has found the God in whom he can believe after Auschwitz. 'I believe there is a conception of God', he writes, 'which remains meaningful after the death of the God-Who-acts-in-history. It is a very old conception of God with deep roots in both Western and Oriental mysticism. According to this conception, God is spoken of as the holy nothingness. When God is thus designated, He is conceived as the ground and source of all existence... God as the nothing is not absence of being but superfluity of being'.¹¹ Though such a view has affinities with other religions such as Buddhism, Rubenstein's position is far removed from the traditional understanding of God as the compassionate redeemer of Israel who lovingly watches over his chosen people.

Rubenstein's redefinition of God's nature avoids the dilemma of Divine theodicy, but it is meaningless for Jews who accept the traditional understanding of God. Rubenstein declares that after Auschwitz it is an illusion to believe in such a God and that each of us must accept that the universe is unconcerned with our lives, prayers and hopes. Yet it is just such a view that the theist rejects; what he sees instead is a justification for God's ways, and that is what Rubenstein contends is impossible. To say that God is Divine nothingness merely confuses the issues. Thus rather than providing an ade-

¹¹ *Ibid* p. 315.

quate theodicy in the face of the horrors of the Holocaust, Rubenstein merely plunges the believer deeper into despair.

A DEISTIC ALTERNATIVE

Unlike Wiesel and Rubenstein a number of Jewish thinkers have attempted to adopt a more positive theological stance. In the *Tremendum* published in 1981 Arthur A. Cohen addressed the religious dilemmas raised by the Holocaust. Previously he had said nothing about the religious perplexities connected with the destruction of 6 million Jews in the Nazi era. In *The Natural and the Supernatural Jew* published in 1962 he had constructed a modern theology of Judaism without dealing with evil either in itself or in its horrific manifestation in the concentration camps. But in his later book Cohen uses the term 'tremendum' to designate an event of vast significance. Mindful of Rudolf Otto's characterization of God's holiness as *mysterium tremendum*, Cohen argues that *mysterium tremendum* and *tremendum* convey the aspect of vastness and the resonance of terror. Yet these terms designate different realities. According to Cohen, the Holocaust was the human *tremendum*, the enormity of an infinitized man, who no longer seems to fear death, more to the point, fears it so completely, denies death so mightily, that the only patent of his refutation and denial is to build a mountain of corpses to the divinity of the dead'.¹² For Cohen the death camps were the *tremendum* since they represent an inversion of life to an orgiastic celebration of death. Like Otto's *mysterium tremendum*, Cohen's notion of the *tremendum* is meant to suggest a sense of unfathomable mystery. Cohen believes that the Holocaust was completely irrational and unique, and he doubts whether historians can understand its nature and significance.

Like Rubenstein, Cohen recognizes that the Holocaust presented insurmountable difficulties for classical theism and for the Jewish understanding of God's relationship with the Jewish people. For Cohen post Holocaust theology must take account of three central elements: (1) God must abide in a universe in which God's presence and evil are both seen as real; (2) the relationship of God to all creation must be seen as meaningful and valuable; and (3) the reality of God is not isolated from God's involvement with creation. In formulating a theological response which embraces these features, he draw on Lurianic kabbalah as well as the philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig. According to Cohen, initially God was all in all and there was nothing else. But God overflowed absolute self-containment in a moment of love. For Cohen the world is God's created over, lovingly formed by the Divine word without the surrender of human freedom. Humanity is essential

¹² A. Cohen, *Tremendum* (Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981) as quoted by R. Rubenstein and J. Roth, *op. cit.* p. 330.

because without it the world would be unable to respond to God's love or personality.

Human beings, Cohen asserts, have the capacity to respond to God since they partake of God's speech and freedom. According to Cohen, such freedom was intended to be tempered by reason, but this did not occur and therefore human freedom became the basis of the horrific events of the Holocaust. In advancing this view, Cohen criticizes those who complain that God was silent during the events of the Holocaust. Such an assessment, Cohen notes, is a mistaken yearning for a non-existent interruptive God who is expected to interfere with earthly life. But if there were such a God, the created order would be an extension of the Divine realm, and there would be no opportunity for freedom. 'God is not the strategist of our particularities or our historical condition', he writes, 'but rather mystery of futurity, always our posse, never our acts. If we can begin to see God less as the interferer whose insertion is welcome (when it accords with our needs) and more as the immensity whose reality is our prefiguration ... we shall have won a sense of God whom we may love and honour, but whom we no longer fear and from whom we no longer demand'.¹³

Since Cohen does not believe that God acts in history, he dismisses the view that God was responsible for Auschwitz. Instead he asserts that God acts in the future. The Divine Life is a 'a filament within the historical, but never the filament that we can identify and ignite according to our requirements'. Human beings, he believes, have the capacity to 'obscure, eclipse, burn out the Divine filament'.¹⁴ God's role is not to act as a direct agent in human affairs, but as a teacher; His intention is to instruct human beings so as to limit their destructive impulses. For Cohen, Divine teaching is manifest in the halachah; in this way human freedom is granted within the framework of Jewish law. Given this conception of Divine action, God is in no way responsible for the horrors of the death camps – Auschwitz was the work of human beings who exercised their freedom for destruction and murder. According to Cohen such licence to act against God's will raises serious doubts about the viability of the State of Israel to protect the Jewish community from future disasters. The return to a homeland may prove more threatening even than genocide for, 'in no way is the Jew allowed any longer ... to repeat his exile amid the nations, to disperse himself in order to survive'.¹⁵ Further, Cohen asserts that dedication to the Holy Land devoid of a belief in a transcendent Deity can become a form of paganism. The founding of a Jewish state is thus not an adequate response to the religious perplexities posed by the Holocaust.

Although Cohen's redefinition of God's nature avoids the difficulties of seeing God as responsible for the events of the Holocaust, he has eliminated

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 331.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 332.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 333.

a fundamental aspect of Divine activity which is presupposed by Biblical and rabbinical Judaism. Throughout Jewish sources, God is understood as both transcendent and immanent – He created the universe and continuously sustains it. The God of the Jewish faith is the Lord of History. He guided His chosen people out of Egypt, revealed Himself on Mt Sinai, delivered them up to the Promised Land, and providentially directs human history to its ultimate fulfilment in the world to come. Within this eschatological endeavour, God intervenes in history; He is a God who is present in everyday life. Conceiving God as a Divine filament in no sense corresponds with this traditional conception. Thus Cohen's solution to the problem of the Holocaust deprives the faith of a view of God which is central to the Jewish heritage. His response to the horrors of the death camps is unsatisfactory for those who seek an explanation how a benevolent God could have permitted the slaughter of 6 million innocent victims.

TRADITIONAL JEWISH THEOLOGY

A number of theologians have been unwilling to alter the traditional understanding of God in attempting to make sense of the Holocaust. According to Eliezer Berkovits in *Faith after the Holocaust*, the modern Jewish response to the destruction of 6 million Jews should be modelled on Job's example. If there is no answer to the quest for an understanding of God's silence in the face of Nazi genocide, 'it is better to be without it than in the sham of... the humbug of a disbelief encouraged by people who have eaten their fill at the tables of a satiated society'.¹⁶ At Auschwitz God was hidden, yet according to Berkovits in His hiddenness He was actually present. As hidden God, He is Saviour; in the apparent void He is the redeemer of Israel. How this is to be understood is shrouded in mystery. Berkovits writes that if Jewish faith is to be meaningful in the post-Holocaust age, the Jew must make room for the impenetrable darkness of the death camps within religious belief: 'The darkness will remain, but in its "light" he will make his affirmations. The inexplicable will not be explained, yet it will become a positive influence in the formulation of that which is to be acknowledged... perhaps in the awful misery of man will be revealed to us the awesome mystery of God'.¹⁷ The Holocaust is thus part of God's incomprehensible plan, defying rational justification and transcending human understanding.

Such an argument is obviously not a solution to the problem of the Holocaust; rather it is a challenge to believe in God despite overwhelming obstacles. This evasion of the theological difficulties, while leaving room for blind faith, in no way explains how God could have allowed the Holocaust to take place. Berkovits claims that in His hiddenness, the hidden God is

¹⁶ E. Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust* (Ktav Publishing House Inc., 1973) pp. 5–6. ¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 70.

revealed and that He was both saviour and redeemer in the death camps. But how can this be so? For some Jews such an appeal to God's inscrutable plan merely aggravates and caricatures the horrors of the Nazi regime and deprives them of any firm foundation for religious belief. Thus Berkovits offers no help for those who are unable to follow Job's example, and instead seek a viable Jewish theodicy, in which the justice and righteousness of God are defended in the face of evil and suffering.

Another attempt to provide a Biblically based explanation for God's activity during the Nazi regime was proposed by Ignaz Maybaum in *The Face of God After Auschwitz*. In this study Maybaum argues that God has an enduring relationship with Israel, that He continues to act in history and that Israel has a divinely sanctioned mission to enlighten other nations. According to Maybaum the Holocaust is a result of God's intervention, but not as a Divine punishment. In explaining this view, he uses the crucifixion of Jesus as a model for understanding Jewish suffering during the Holocaust. Just as Jesus was an innocent victim whose death provides a means of salvation for humanity, so the deaths of the victims of the Holocaust were sacrificial offerings. Maybaum asserts that the Jews were murdered by the Nazis because they were chosen by God for this sacrifice. In this way God's purposes can be fulfilled. 'The Golgotha of modern mankind is Auschwitz', he asserts. 'The cross, the Roman gallows, was replaced by the gas chamber'.¹⁸

Maybaum contends that Jewish history was scarred by three major disasters which he designates by the Hebrew word *churban* – a term referring to an event of massive destructiveness. For Maybaum each *churban* was a divine intervention which had decisive significance for the course of history. The first of these cataclysmic occurrences was the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. which resulted in the diaspora of the Jewish community. This uprooting of the population was a catastrophe for the nation, but it did inaugurate the Jewish mission to bring a knowledge of God and His laws to other peoples outside Israel's borders. In this respect the first *churban* was a manifestation of 'creative destructiveness'. The second *churban* was the Roman devastation of the second Temple in Jerusalem which inaugurated the establishment of the synagogue as the major focus of Jewish life where study and prayer replaced sacrifice. According to Maybaum, such activity is of a higher order than the sacrificial system of the Biblical period – this transformation of religious life was possible only through an act of destruction. Such an interpretation of the Jewish past runs counter to the traditional understanding of these events as divine punishment for the sinfulness of the nation.

The final *churban* was the Holocaust, an event in which the Jewish people

¹⁸ I. Maybaum, *The Face of God After the Auschwitz* (Polak and Van Gennep, 1965), p. 36.

were sacrificial victims in an event of creative destructiveness. In Maybaum's view God used the Holocaust to bring about the end of the Middle Ages, and usher in a new era of modernity. The sin for which the Jews died was the retention of remnants of the medieval European feudal structure. After the First World War the West could have transformed Eastern European society, but it did not act. As a result the devastation of the war served no purpose and Hitler was sent by God to bring about what the progressives failed to do. According to Maybaum, God used the Holocaust as a means to bring about the modern world. In this tragedy all that was medieval in character – including the majority of Eastern European Jews who lived in ghettos – had to perish. The murder of 6 million Jews was thus an act of creative destruction. With the elimination of the traditional Jewish community of Eastern Europe, world Jewry shifted to the United States, Western Europe, Russia, and Israel. In these countries Jews were able to live in an emancipated environment which celebrated rationality and progress. Jews therefore suffer in order to bring about the rule of God over the world and its peoples; their God-appointed mission is to serve the course of historical progress and bring mankind into a new era. Only a part, though admittedly a traumatically large part of the Jewish people, was exterminated. The planned genocide of the Jewish people did not succeed, and Maybaum emphasizes that the remnant that was saved has been selected by God as a perennial witness to His presence in the world and in the historical process. Of the sacrificial victims of Auschwitz he states categorically: 'Their death purged western civilization so that it can again become a place where man can live, do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God'.¹⁹

Though this justification of the Holocaust is based on Biblical concepts, Maybaum's explanation will no doubt strike many as offensive. If God is benevolent, merciful and just in his dealings with mankind, how could he have intentionally planned the destruction of 6 million Jews? Surely through His omnipotence God could have brought about the redemption of the world without decimating His chosen people. Furthermore, the image of Hitler as God's instrument is a terrible and grotesque picture; to see God as a surgeon operating on the body of Israel, lacking pity for those who died in the process, is to make a mockery of God's eternal love. Unlike the ancient Israelites, whom God punished for their sins through the military intervention of Nebuchadnezzar, Jews who lost their lives in the camps were simply innocent victims of Nazi persecution. Thus Maybaum's conception of God as slayer and saviour is hardly an adequate justification for God's apparent indifference to mass death, injustice, and suffering in the concentration camps.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 84.

THE HOLOCAUST AND REVELATION

Another traditional approach to the Holocaust is to see in the death camps a manifestation of God's will that His chosen people survive. Such a paradoxical view is most eloquently expressed by Emil Fackenheim in a series of publications in which he contends that God revealed Himself to Israel out of the furnaces of Auschwitz. For Fackenheim the Holocaust was the most disorienting event in Jewish history – a crisis which requires from the Jewish community a reassessment of God's presence in history. Though the Holocaust, he believes, God issued the 614th commandment: Jews are forbidden to grant posthumous victories to Hitler. According to Fackenheim, Jews are here instructed to survive as Jews. They are commanded to remember in their very guts and bowels the martyrs of the Holocaust, lest their memory perish: Jews are forbidden, furthermore, to deny or despair of God, however much they may have to contend with Him or with belief in Him. They are forbidden finally to despair of the world as the place which is to become the kingdom of God lest we help make it a meaningless place. 'We help make it a meaningless place in which God is dead or irrelevant and everything is permitted; to abandon any of these imperatives, in response to Hitler's victory at Auschwitz, would be to hand him yet other posthumous victors'.²⁰ For Fackenheim, it is a betrayal of the Jewish heritage to question whether the traditional Jewish conception of God can be sustained after the Holocaust.

In his later work, Fackenheim stresses that the Holocaust represents a catastrophic rupture with previously accepted views of Judaism, Christianity and western philosophy.²¹ According to Fackenheim, the process of mending this rupture (*tikkun*) must take place in the scheme of life rather than of thought. The resistance to the destructive logic of the death camps constitutes the beginning of such repair. As Fackenheim explains: some camp inmates were unwilling to become 'muselmann' (those who were dead while still alive). Such resistance was exhibited by pregnant mothers who refused to abort their pregnancies hoping that their offspring would survive and frustrate the plans of the National Socialist Party to eliminate every Jew. Again other Jewish partisans took to the woods to fight the Nazis, and Hasidic Jews prayed even though they were forbidden to do so. Though the number of those who resisted the Nazis was small, they did exhibit that the logic of destruction could be overcome. These acts of resistance are of primary importance. It is not enough to understand the Holocaust – it must be resisted in flesh-and-blood action. In this connection, Fackenheim stresses that only as a consequence of the deed of resistance can resistive thought have any significance. The Holocaust was intended to give its victims no possibility of

²⁰ E. Fackenheim, *Judaism* xvi (1967), 272–3.

²¹ E. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World* (Schoken Books, 1982).

escaping the fate of becoming the living dead and subsequently dying in the gas chambers. The first act of resistance was the determination to survive or to die as a human being. The second step was to resist the nature of the logic of destruction. In the case of those victims who did resist, thought and action were interconnected: their recognition of the Nazi logic of destruction helped produce resistance to it – a life-and-death struggle that went on day and night.

Such resistance was more than self-protection. Since the Holocaust was a *novum* in history, this resistance was also a *novum*. As emphasised by Pelagia Lewinska, a Polish Roman Catholic, ‘They had condemned us to die in our own filth’, she wrote, ‘to drown in mud, in our own excrement. They wished to abuse us, to destroy our human dignity. From the instant when I grasped the motivating principle ... it was as if I had been awakened from a dream ... I felt under orders to live and if I did die in Auschwitz, it would be as a human being, I would hold on to my dignity’.²² Fackenheim views this statement as evidence of the ontological dimension of resistance and of a commanding voice. In the past when Jews were threatened, they bore witness to God through martyrdom but Fackenheim believes that such an act would have made no sense in the concentration camps. Such death was what the Nazis hope to accomplish. This resistance served as a new kind of sanctification; the refusal to die was a holy act. For Fackenheim those who heard God’s command during the Holocaust were the inmates of the camps who felt under an obligation to resist the logic of destruction. The rupture between the pre-Holocaust and post-Holocaust world must be mended by such resistance. Among the most significant Jewish acts of *tikkun* in the post-Holocaust world was the decision of the survivors of the Nazi period to make their homeland in Israel. Though Israel is continually endangered, the founding of a Jewish state represents a monumental attempt to overcome the Holocaust. For the first time in nearly two thousand years Jews have assumed responsibility for their own future. Furthermore, the establishment of a Jewish state is the precondition of post-Holocaust *tikkun* of Jewish-Christian relations. Before the Holocaust Jews depended on the majority for their welfare, but after the Holocaust Jews became the majority in their own country. In Israel the Jews became independent and produced weapons with which they could defend themselves. This transformation of Jewish life offers hope for the continuation of Jewish life after the tragic events of the Holocaust.

The difficulty with Fackenheim’s view is that he does not attempt to justify his claim that Auschwitz was a revelation-event bearing Torah to twentieth-century Jews. This is simply asserted, yet it is not at all clear why this should be so. On the contrary, for many Jews the Holocaust has made it impossible to believe in the traditional Jewish picture of God as a Lord of history who has revealed His will to the Jewish people. For such Jews the world is a

²² *Ibid.* p. 250.

tragic and meaningless place where human beings have no basis for hope in Divine aid or in any ultimate solution of the ills that beset them. Though they might agree that the lesson of the Holocaust is that the Jewish people must survive against all odds, this would not be because of God's revelation in the death camps. Further, it is hard to see how Fackenheim's admonition to believe in God 'lest Judaism perish' could actually sustain religious belief. Trust in God is of a different order altogether from commitment to the Jewish people, and it is regrettable that Fackenheim fails to see the distinction.

JEWISH SUFFERING AND THE AFTERLIFE

These varied attempts to come to terms with the Holocaust all suffer from serious defects. As we have seen, Rubenstein rejects the traditional Jewish understanding of God's nature and activity and argues for a concept of Divine reality far-removed from the Jewish heritage. For Jewish traditionalists seeking to make sense of the horrors of the Holocaust such a suggestion offers no consolation or promise of hope. Cohen's conception of deism is also so remote from mainstream Jewish thought that it cannot resolve the religious perplexities posed by the death of 6 million Jews in the camps. Wiesel's agonizing struggle with religious doubt illuminates the theological problems connected with the events of the Nazi period but plunges the believer deeper into despair. At the other end of the spectrum the views of writers who have attempted to defend the Biblical and rabbinic concept of God are beset with difficulties. Maybaum's view that God used Hitler as an instrument for the redemption of mankind is a monstrous conception. Fackenheim's assertion that God issued the 614th commandment through the ashes of the death camps will no doubt strike many as wishful thinking. Finally Berkovits' view that God was hidden during the Nazi period offers no theological solution to the problem of suffering. These major Holocaust theologians have therefore not provided satisfactory answers to the dilemmas posed by the death camps. Contemporary Jewish theology is thus a state of crisis both deep-seated and acute: for the first time in history Jews seem unable to account for God's ways.

One element is missing from all these justifications of Jewish suffering; there is no appeal to the Hereafter. Though the Bible only contains faint references to the realm of the dead, the doctrine of Life after Death came into prominence during the Maccabean period when righteous individuals were dying for their faith. Subsequently the belief in the World to Come was regarded as one of the central tenets of the Jewish faith. According to rabbinic scholars, it was inconceivable that life would end at death: God's justice demanded that the righteous of Israel enter into a realm of eternal bliss where they would be compensated for their earthly travail. Because of this belief generations of Jews have been able to reconcile their belief in a

benevolent and merciful God with the terrible tragedies they have endured. Through the centuries the conviction that the righteous would inherit eternal life has sustained generations of Jewish martyrs who suffered persecution and death. As Jews were slaughtered, they glorified God through dedication to the Jewish faith – such an act is referred to as *Kiddush ha-Shem* (Sanctification of the Divine Name). These heroic Jews who remained steadfast in their faith did not question the ways of God; rather their deaths testify to their firm belief in a providential Lord of history who would reserve a place for them in the Hereafter.

In Judaism this act of sanctification was a task for all Jews if the unfortunate circumstances arose. Thus through centuries of oppression *Kiddush ha-Shem* gave meaning to the struggle of Jewish warriors, strength of endurance under cruel torture, and a way out of slavery and conversion through suicide. In the Middle Ages repeated outbreaks of Christian persecution strengthened the Jewish determination to profess their faith. *Kiddush ha-Shem* became a common way of confronting missionary coercion – if Jews were not permitted to live openly as Jews, they were determined not to live at all. When confronted by force, Jews attempted to defend themselves, but chose death if this proved impossible. Thousands of Jews in the Middle Ages lost their lives. Some fell in battle, but the majority committed suicide for their faith. In the chronicles of this slaughter *Kiddush ha-Shem* was the dominant motif; Jews endeavoured to fight their assailants, but when their efforts failed they died as martyrs.

During the medieval period Jews also suffered because of the accusation that they performed ritual murders of Christian children, defamed Christianity in the Talmud, desecrated the Host, and brought about the Black Death. As they endured trials and massacres, they were fortified by the belief that God would redeem them in a future life. Repeatedly they proclaimed their faith in God and witnessed to the tradition of their ancestors. In later centuries *Kiddush ha-Shem* also became part of the history of Spanish Jewry. Under the fire and torture of the Inquisition chambers and tribunals Jews remained committed to their faith. The principles of *Kiddush ha-Shem* supported multitudes of Jews as they faced calamity and death. The reality of their sacrifice and the image of their martyrdom became a dominant element in the Jewish consciousness. Due to the belief in divine reward, the Jewish community escaped disillusionment and despair in the face of tragedy: the courage of those who gave their lives to sanctify God's name became an inspiration to all those who faced similar circumstances. The history of the Jewish people thus bears eloquent testimony to the heroic martyrs who were convinced that reward in Heaven would be vouchsafed to them if they remained faithful to God in their life on earth.

In the concentration camps as well many religious Jews remained loyal to the tradition of *Kiddush ha-Shem*. Joining the ranks of generations of martyrs,

they sanctified God with unshakeable faith. As they awaited the final sentence, they drew strength from one another to witness to the God of Israel. In the camps many Jews faced death silently. When their last moments arrived they died without fear. They neither grovelled nor pleaded for mercy since they believed it was God's judgement to take their lives. With love and trust they awaited the death sentence. As they prepared to surrender themselves to God, they thought only of the purity of their souls. The martyrs of the concentration camps were convinced that their deaths would serve as a prelude to redemption. In Heaven they would receive their just reward, and by sanctifying God's name they could bring forgiveness to the Jewish people.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the belief in eternal salvation which sustained the Jewish people through centuries of persecution, it might be expected that Holocaust theologians would attempt to explain the events of the Nazi period in the context of a future life. As we have seen, this has not occurred. Instead, these writers have set aside doctrines concerning messianic redemption, resurrection and final judgement. This shift in orientation is in part due to the fact that the views expressed in rabbinic literature are not binding. All Jews are obliged to accept the divine origin of the Law but this is not so with regard to theological concepts and theories expounded by the rabbis. Thus it is possible for a Jew to be religiously pious without accepting all the central beliefs of mainstream Judaism.

Given that there is no authoritative bedrock of Jewish theology, Holocaust theologians will no doubt have felt fully justified in ignoring various elements of traditional rabbinic eschatology which have ceased to retain their hold on Jewish consciousness. The doctrine of messianic redemption, for example, has been radically modified in contemporary Jewish thought. In this last century Reform Jews tended to interpret the new liberation in the Western world as the first step towards the realization of the messianic dream: messianic redemption was understood in this-worldly terms. No longer, according to this view, was it necessary for Jews to pray for a restoration in Palestine; rather they should view their own countries as Zion and their political leaders as bringing about the messianic age. Secular Zionists, on the other hand, saw the return to Palestine as the legitimate conclusion to be drawn from the realities of Jewish life in Western countries, thereby viewing the state of Israel as a substitute for the messiah himself. Thus many modern Jews desire to view the messianic hope in naturalistic terms, abandoning the belief in a personal messiah.

Similarly, the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead has in modern times been largely replaced in both Orthodox and non-Orthodox Judaism by the

belief in the immortality of the soul. The original belief in resurrection was an eschatological hope bound up with the rebirth of the nation in the days of the messiah. But as this messianic concept faded into the background so also did this doctrine. For most Jews physical resurrection is simply inconceivable in the light of a scientific understanding of the nature of the world. The late British chief rabbi, J. H. Hertz, for example, argued that what really matters is the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Thus he wrote: 'Many and various are the folk beliefs and poetical fancies in the rabbinical writings concerning Heaven and Hell. Our most authoritative religious guides, however, proclaim that no eye hath seen, nor can mortal fathom, what awaiteth us in the Hereafter; but that even the tarnished soul will not forever be denied spiritual bliss'.

In the Reform community a similar attitude prevails. In a well-known statement of beliefs of Reform Judaism it is stated that Reform Jews 'reassert the doctrine of Judaism that the soul is immortal, grounding this belief on the Divine nature of the human spirit, which forever finds bliss in righteousness and misery in wickedness. We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism the belief in bodily resurrection in Hell and Paradise as abodes for eternal punishment or reward'. The point to note about the conception of the immortal soul in both Orthodox and Reform Judaism is that it is disassociated from traditional notions of messianic redemption and divine judgement. The belief in eternal punishment has also been discarded by a large number of Jews partly because of the interest in penal reform during the past century. Punishment as retaliation in a vindictive sense has been generally rejected. The value of punishment as a deterrent or the protection of society is widely accepted. But the emphasis today is on the reformatory aspects of punishment. In the light of this shift in emphasis the question of reward and punishment in a theological sense is approached in a questioning spirit. Further, the rabbinic view of Hell is seen by many as morally repugnant. Jewish theologians have stressed that it is a delusion to believe that a God of love could have created a place of eternal punishment.

Due to this shift in emphasis in Jewish thought, it is not surprising that Jewish Holocaust theologians have refrained from appealing to the traditional belief in other-worldly reward and punishment in formulating their responses to the horrors of the death camps. Yet without this belief, it is simply impossible to make sense of the world as the creation of an all-good and all-powerful God. Without the eventual vindication of the righteous in Paradise, there is no way to sustain the belief in a providential God who watches over His chosen people. The essence of the Jewish understanding of God is that He loves His chosen people. If death means extinction, there is no way to make sense of the claim that He loves and cherishes all those who died in the concentration camps – suffering and death would ultimately triumph over each of those who perished. But if there is eternal life in a World

to Come, then there is hope that the righteous will share in a divine life. Moreover, the divine attribute of justice demands that the righteous of Israel who met their death as innocent victims of the Nazis will reap an everlasting reward. Here then is an answer to the religious perplexities of the Holocaust. The promise of immortality offers a way of reconciling the belief in a loving and just God with the nightmare of the death camps. As we have seen, this hope sustained the Jewish people through centuries of suffering and martyrdom. Now that Jewry stands on the threshold of the twenty-first century, it must again serve as the fulcrum of religious belief. Only in this way will the Jewish people who have experienced the Valley of the Shadow of Death be able to say in the ancient words of the Psalmist: 'I shall fear no evil for thou art with me'.

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